

Swimming Against the Current. Resistance to a Black Superintendent's Fight to Lead for Equity in an Urban School District

By Dr. Shawn Joseph

Summary

In a [study by the Council of Great City Schools completed in 2014](#), the average tenure of a Black superintendent was 1.2 years. Dr. Shawn Joseph, a former superintendent, walks us through his article discussing the conditions and challenges Black folks face when trying to address historical issues in schools.

This article is for Black superintendents and those who want to support them.

The project illustrates the importance of using culturally responsive practices highlighting:

- Navigating white political power structures
- Double consciousness

Guiding Questions

After reading the article, consider the following questions?

1. What resonated with you?
2. What did this spark in you or inspire you to think about?
3. What was an Aha moment for you while reading?
4. What is 1 thing you will do as a result of reading this piece? Explain.

Don't have time to view this project? Here is the synopsis sheet with what we learned.

Lesson 1: A Black superintendent can never run faster than the culture and be successful.

Black superintendents must understand that they are leading in a white power structure that was never designed for them, nor the Black students they aim to serve. Black superintendents are up against a white political structure. You must go slow to go fast. It takes time, strategy, skill, and collaboration. People in power don't just give it up. You have to get people comfortable with you being in that position of power. When shifting resources, you have to let them know that you are not hurting them as equity allows everyone to come up. You have to politically understand the landscape.

Lesson 2: You will come across racist and they may be in power and how you handle them matters.

You can't get in a power struggle. How you approach folks is important, even if they are blately wrong. Martyrdom is not a strategy, because if you are not in the seat you can't do the work. How do we get our dispositions, attitude, and approach right. Not to be so offended that it causes noise, disruption, and chaos. The status quo is powerful, and trying to change it causes forces stronger, more powerful, and overwhelming. So you have to be thoughtful to figure out how to navigate. If you move too fast or react too fast, you are susceptible to dying.

Lesson 3: When you push, expect to get pushed back.

Pay attention to the noise that is emerging, particularly the white middle class community's reaction to the focus on equity. The superintendent in this case study thought everyone cared about equity for Black and Brown students, but the reality is they care about their own self interest. You have to explicitly give comfort for those who have benefitted from inequities. You must have a bifurcated approach to make folks understand that we are growing everyone.

Double consciousness helps . you must be able to be comfortable in Black and white spaces, and how to navigate and assure both entities that you are "here for them."

Lesson 4: Be thoughtful, strategic, and building allyship

Although we are trained, credentialed, and qualified for the position, there are long held social prejudices regarding Blackness that might diminish the communities confidence in our abilities, decision-making, and leadership. Due to the endemic nature of racism and anti-Blackness, Black leaders will inevitably face bias and discrimination, so respond in a more strategic way. Don't allow emotions and the oppressor to win by reacting in a way that kills you.

A Black superintendent has to be like a great running back allowing the school board to Block for you and you run behind them. You are not trying to get 20 yards every play, but instead multiple first downs. Instead of trying to solve all of the problems immediately. You can't do too much too fast. The problems have been there for a long time and you will not solve them all. You have to be slow, methodical, and steady.

Tool for Black Superintendents working toward equity, justice, and liberation

Let's get started. Use this tool to help navigate your superintendent tenure for an equitable school/district.

1. Start with column four. List the equitable district outcome/change you want to see. Use a separate row for each change you envision.
2. Move to the first column. Determine the district status currently. What does it look like?
3. In column two, list all of the allies that can serve as your blockers to move your vision along.
4. In column three, take time to think about the strategic steps needed to move the district toward the equity goal. These steps will answer the question, how you want to get to the goal.

<p>What is the political landscape of the district currently?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who are the major political players? • What do the political players support? • What does the community support? 	<p>Ally Blockers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who are the political players who can support this effort? 	<p>Strategic action steps to accomplish the goal? (objectives) You must go slow to go fast.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the specific steps you need to take to reach your goal? 	<p>District Change (Goal)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is one equitable outcome that you envision for the district?

